

THE
Absurd Hero

IN AMERICAN FICTION

UPDIKE • STYRON • BELLOW • SALINGER

REVISED EDITION

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In popular badinage, as in serious literary criticism, "absurdity" is the *bon mot* if not always the *mot juste* of this decade. I should therefore point out in the beginning that the concept of the absurd treated in these pages differs considerably from its use with respect to the contemporary theatre—especially the theatre of Beckett and Ionesco. The most obvious differences are in terms of style: the surfaces, at least, of the work of John Updike, William Styron, Saul Bellow, and J. D. Salinger are far more conventionally "realistic" than anything found in avant-garde drama. And as style is above all the writer's method of expressing his point of view, there are also, therefore, fundamental divergences in attitudes. The initial assumptions of absurd literature are, however, compatible: the belief that human experience is fragmented, irritating, *apparently* unredeemable. The ubiquitousness of the absurd arises from the individual artist's vision of the ultimate consequences of this life-denying experience. Albert Camus repeatedly suggested that man could, despite the hostility of an absurd environment, establish a new and viable basis for heroism and thus for human dignity; the "non-hero" who populates so much contemporary drama and fiction is thus not the sole or unavoidable product of such a milieu. In short, absurd literature can be either optimistic or pessimistic; the fundamental and determining issue is whether, in the conflict between man and his "absurd" environment, man or environment will emerge victorious; whether, in terms of the individual, humanistic or nihilistic impulses will dominate; whether, denied conventional social and religious consolation, man is capable of producing adequate spiritual antibodies to resist

despair. Thus, when we deal with absurd literature, we are confronted as we are in all styles (but particularly, as an historical precedent, in naturalism) not solely with the immediate image of life which the artist presents, but with the ultimate conclusions to which his work leads us: is absurdity both our birthright and our inevitable doom, or is it merely another vigil through which man must pass in advancing to a new level of human consciousness and new standards of responsibility? Is it senescence or puberty?

Like Camus, the four contemporary novelists discussed in this book share a belief in man's ability to establish a new secular humanism in a world not only postlapsarian, but also post-Freudian and collectivist. If such a man goes beyond the absurd, he does so only by coming directly to grips with his absurd environment; he is thus an absurd hero. The fruits of his labor may also seem absurd in comparison with traditional notions of heroic conflict and reward (or redemption); but they bring a believable promise of rain to the fashionable wasteland, and because they transcend (or promise to transcend) the absurd in terms of the absurd, the challenge which they offer to the choristers of anti-literature possesses vital integrity.

Because the novelists whom I have considered are optimistic chroniclers of the absurd experience, their work is stylistically less extreme than that of Beckett or Ionesco, less preposterously discontinuous and fragmented than a novel like William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* or Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Her*. For however unconventional the environments and "heroes" of whom they treat, their work is part of a recognizable humanistic tradition; indeed, the only term which seems to me at all satisfactory in describing the redeeming life-stance which they suggest, is "post-existential humanism," a phrase offered by Wylie Sypher in his provocative study of *The Loss of the Self*.

A number of reasons encourage me to investigate the optimistic literature of the absurd rather than the pessimistic. First of all, the angry, pessimistic, even nihilistic literature of the postwar decades, in its extremes of attitude and form, has been vigorously self-ad-

vertising—however unclearly it may have been understood; the wasteland theory of literature has thus become something of a popular as well as a critical cliché, meaninglessness has often characterized both theme and style (most extremely, perhaps, in William Burroughs), and alienation has become the hallmark of the “serious” novel and the “serious” novelist. This book does not attempt to deny the significance or the richness of the work produced by exponents of the pessimistic concept of absurdity, but merely to suggest that this view is countered by a weight of optimism, and indeed one represented by some of the most skilled writers of our time: writers who grant the absurd premises, but who deny, even decry, the somewhat conventional absurd conclusions. Merely to chronicle the horrors and hazards of a meaningless world may be a significant achievement (and one in which the American gift for gab can be a great asset), and some of these contemporary chronicles—most notably Thomas Pynchon’s *V*—have employed exciting and perhaps crucial new narrative techniques; but an obsession with the meaningless can result in art that is puerile, or merely prurient, as contrived and predictable and fashionable as the “mass,” selfless world which it purports to reject. Pynchon avoids these pitfalls through his acute comic vision as well as sheer stylistic dexterity, as do a large company of younger humorists—Terry Southern, J. P. Donleavy, Thomas Berger, Bruce Jay Friedman, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Warren Miller, James Purdy, Ken Kesey, and Richard G. Stern—who promise to usher in a vital new phase in American fiction. And despite the frequent “blackness” of their humor, it serves to maintain a crucial balance, to avoid the pitfalls of preciousness and chic despair.

In our devoted mourning of the giants of the older generation, the flurry of lionizing and then denigrating the Beat Generation, the typically American fascination with cultivating and appropriating such new writers as the black humorists, and in merchandising the hitherto unpublishable like Henry Miller, we have perhaps slighted what may well be the most important development in contemporary American fiction, represented by those writers who have grappled

with the meaningless and with great integrity have suggested paths through the modern wasteland, even if they have not always been able to chart those paths with complete precision. Recognizing the discontinuity of much modern experience, they nonetheless have seen man's plight in terms of a continuous humanistic tradition, and not as some uniquely soured modern pottage. They can express despair without succumbing to it, and they can question and deny the validity of traditional consolations without denying the traditions of the human spirit.

I have turned to the work of Albert Camus because his essays—particularly those in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—seem to me most consistently and fruitfully to present the optimistic potential of the absurd experience, and to offer useful terminology for an analysis of that experience in fiction. I have nowhere maintained that he has exercised a direct influence on the four novelists whom I have analyzed, but only that they share impressions of the modern environment and hopes for it which are mutually illuminating. I have consciously avoided any discussion of Camus's own ambiguous relationship to the existentialist movement, which is itself continuously recruiting new founding fathers (or grandfathers—as in Paul Tillich's tracing of the movement to Pascal) and claiming an almost meaninglessly wide circle of progeny. The most fundamental question raised by these novelists is, to be sure, *existenz*, and the choice between being and nothingness is always with us; nonetheless, my primary interest in Camus has been his vivid evocation of what so often seems the dominant mood of our literary time, and his description of the alternatives which man can choose during the dark night of the besieged soul.

In electing to discuss the work of Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger in light of these theories, I have excluded, of course, other writers who might have been considered with equal fruitfulness. John Hawkes and Edward Lewis Wallant seem to me the most significant contemporary omissions, and I particularly regret that Wallant

receives only brief reference in *The Absurd Hero*; but his four brilliant and moving novels surely qualify him for a book in his own right. In the final analysis, I can only resist hiding behind the idea that selection entails omission, for my choice of these particular novelists is also the result of a personal conviction that each has made a major and distinct contribution to our understanding of the contemporary milieu, and that each now presents us with an adequate "critical mass" to warrant such detailed analysis. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that this book will not contribute to that instant canonization which literary criticism all too often produces in America. Of the four writers presented here, only Saul Bellow has fulfilled what is patronizingly termed a writer's "promise," though all of them have produced works of social and intellectual significance. Updike may still fall prey to his precocious sense of technique (though this seems to me unlikely), and Styron is yet to demonstrate that he can successfully combine in a mature work the compressed metaphysical style of *The Long March* with the more epic and frequently diffuse point of view which characterizes his two long novels. And if Seymour Glass succumbed to the mystical banana fever, J. D. Salinger may never himself recover from Seymour fever; that, in any event, is what most of his recent fiction suggests—in particular, the charmingly inconsequential "Hapworth 16, 1924," published too recently to be discussed in *The Absurd Hero*. But if the final literary merits of these writers must await the verdict of future generations, the value of their diverse examinations of the absurd modern environment is nonetheless of acute significance to this generation, and it is to analyze the significance of their novels, not to canonize the novelists, that *The Absurd Hero* was written.

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Several years have elapsed since the following study was completed, and I look back on it now with something of that surprised recognition one experiences when discovering himself staring out from a forgotten photograph. The face is familiar, but time has wrought changes, and my first impulse was to make sweeping alterations in order to reflect these changes more thoroughly than the brief scope of a preface will permit. In the end, I have had to content myself with some selective retouching: these introductory remarks, the correction of errors in the original text, and the updating of the four checklists. Criticism of contemporary literature must always lag behind the dynamic fact of that literature, and it would be "absurd" to presume otherwise; but the four writers considered here still represent a vital part of the modern American literary experience—which will hopefully argue the relevance of repeating this description of the post-existential tradition to which Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger seem to me to belong.

My own more recent interests have carried me toward the more extreme philosophical and stylistic aspects of "absurd" thought—into the *nouveau roman*, the modern theater and cinema, and the fine arts.¹ Nevertheless, I continue to believe that there is a recognizable tradition in Western literature whereby the absurd becomes a way of affirming the resources of the human spirit, of exalting sacrifice and suffering, of ennobling the man capable of sustaining the vital opposition between intention and reality. That American writers

¹ See my article "Absurd Art, Absurd Men, Absurd Heroes," in *The Literature of the Western World*, vol. VI, ed. David Daiches and A. J. Thorlby.

should so frequently illustrate these more affirmative aspects of absurd experience is hardly surprising. The writer in America has traditionally had a strong resistance to despair, and although there are now signs that an absurd tradition, in something like the purer "French" sense, is emerging in America, absurd art in its most extreme forms will no doubt continue to be tempered by the essential optimism and the concern for practical solutions ¹⁹⁴²⁻¹⁹⁴⁵ that so strongly color American thinking and that serve as a barrier to the exploitation of those darker and more grotesque absurdities encountered in Beckett or Genet or Kosinski. ^{about 1945}

Since the initial publication of *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, two large and complex novels have appeared that call for special attention. Both John Updike's *Couples* and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* are impressive achievements, although neither, perhaps, is the novel for which Updike's or Styron's followers have hoped for so many years; both have obvious flaws, but any balanced critical appraisal of their virtues has been obscured by the highly topical controversies that they provoked, and that the novels themselves seemed to invite. In narrative manner, structure, and symbolism, both are rather "old fashioned": they are intricately plotted, densely populated (although dominated by a single male character), historically allusive, and constructed with a craftsmanlike pride in neat, tight joints and well-mitred ¹⁹⁴⁵ corners that accommodate their carpenter heroes with symbolic appropriateness. Both works suffer at times from a top-heavy weight of symbolic innuendo, and both raise more questions about the experience of the hero than they are able to answer. While *Couples* seems to me more totally realized than *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, both are engrossing studies of the insidious mechanisms by which society creates its victims, asks them to make public their agony, and then purges itself through their ritual sacrifice. ¹⁹⁴⁵

In *Couples*, John Updike moved from the miniaturist tradition in which he had consistently worked, to the creation of a vast and

variously populated fictional world. The contrast between this sprawling novel and his earlier, simple, lyric works seems at first improbable—as though Jane Austen had decided to write *Middlemarch*. (There are real parallels between this novel and George Eliot's work, not merely in Updike's creation of a macrocosmic environment, but also in his use of contemporary history and his overt treatment of a sexuality that is strongly present in the symbols of *Middlemarch*.) Nonetheless, the break with his own creative past is not so great as it first appears. First of all, Updike has always sung the praises of heterosexual love; no American writer has described the physical act itself with more rapturous or voluptuous language. Furthermore, Updike's central preoccupation is still, as it has always been, with the prerequisites, the privileges, the scope, and the terror of individual freedom; his hero is still a pilgrim in search of that world where his soul can give its best.

Structurally, *Couples* represents a new departure; thematically, it carries forward the quest motif reiterated by Updike in all his major work; stylistically, it furthers the argument that even his most hostile critics grudgingly allow—that for sheer technical mastery of the English language, Updike has few contemporary equals. In *Couples*, that mastery is most readily apparent in the descriptions of sexual encounters—never marred by the face of the giggling schoolboy who sometimes emerges in Lawrence. But Updike can shower on inanimate objects, or on fleeting sensations, the same wealth of language, endowing them not so much with symbolic import (when he does, the symbols are often too obtrusive) as with an enrichment of their own significant reality, their “thingness.” The following brief passage, casual and entirely representational in manner, illustrates well the distinctive magic of such a style: “He would spend most of each day on Indian Hill with the three ranch houses, which rose in quick frames from the concrete foundations: an alphabet of two-by-fours, N and T and M and H, interlocked footings and girders and joists and studs and plates and sills. Piet, hammer in hand, liked to feel the bite taken into gravity.”

Updike's hero, Piet Hanema, finds "all his fate in the letters of his name: *me, a man, amen ah.*" His role as modern everyman and the religious implications of his quest are thus carefully suggested. The jacket design for *Couples*, a detail from William Blake's watercolor drawing *Adam and Eve Sleeping*, selected by Updike himself, is hardly (as some reviewers suggested) a gratuitous attempt to give the novel's frank sexual scenes a respectable context. The drawing is related to the novel in a variety of ways, but most significantly through the numerous references to Eden and to the prelapsarian, "overheated warmth" of the greenhouse where Piet played as a boy; through his own obsession with his parents' death; and through the name Piet, with its suggestions of piety and Pietà.

In one sense, Piet's "sacrifice" is a redemption of the fallen world of Tarbox: "The couples, though they had quickly sealed themselves off from Piet's company, from contamination by his failure, were yet haunted and chastened, as if his fall had been sacrificial." And Piet, with his reverence for past civilizations (arrowheads and unearthed Indian bones), the simple joy he takes in carpentry, his compassion and his acute awareness of death, is appropriately compared to both Christ and Noah, as well as to Adam. But Updike's novel is hardly a simple allegory, and it is ultimately through the flesh that Piet finds his way out of the maze of gossip and adultery and cynicism that is Tarbox. He leaves behind the angel Angela to love a woman of the earth, Foxy, and the church that had once promised some other consolation stands in ruins.

Thus, Updike has once more celebrated the communion of love—more fully and more hopefully than in any of his previous novels. Piet's roguish quest is more than an exceptionally energetic example of the fashionable couplings of a fashionable New England town; it is an earnest, often harrowing search for something to still the voice of death that rings in his ears. In celebrating the body, he also celebrates life itself. That he does so singlemindedly, without regard for custom and convention, and, most significantly, in a world that speaks repeatedly in terms of death (his parents, a hamster, Indian bones,

the Kennedy baby, Kennedy himself, Foxy's aborted child, John Ong), is sufficient, I believe, for him to represent the absurd tradition as defined by Camus—the tradition in which a man consistently opposes his inmost intention to even the most hostile reality. Piet Hanema is as intriguing, as whole, as real, and as “heroic” a character as we have had in American literature for a great many years; and *Couples*, despite occasional repetitiveness and a creaking Victorian conclusion, is a novel whose interest will not soon be exhausted.

There are moments when the conjuring act on which *The Confessions of Nat Turner* depends is unquestionably successful, but ultimately Styron's own rich prose style betrays him. Perhaps the choice of a first-person narrator was a mistake, although equally improbable but imaginatively far more successful experiments with first-person narration have been made in a number of recent novels, including Romulus Linney's *Slowly, By Thy Hand Unfurled* and Brian Moore's *I Am Mary Donne*. At times Nat Turner tells us too much, in a language far too subtle, too literary and polished; at other moments he tells us too little, as though there were areas of his experience that Styron himself was incapable of penetrating—for the vagueness cannot be Nat's alone. There are even instances when the novel assumes an almost journalistic anonymity, when the speaking voice seems to belong neither to Styron nor to Nat, as in the description of Miss Sarah: “. . . a fat, silly, sweet woman with small intelligence but with an amplitude of good cheer that enabled her to disgorge without effort peals of jolly, senseless laughter.” The style here is surely closer to Fielding than to Styron, and at any rate wholly inappropriate for a Negro slave who has learned to write chiefly by his own reading of the Bible.

That clouds melodramatically fill the sky on days of ill fortune or that the sun conveniently spotlights moments of joy seems to me appropriate to the novel's tone and intentions. Nat would seek just such supernatural confirmation and perhaps imagine it if it were not present, but there is no such organic justification for his description

of the approach of cavalymen as "a plunging of hoofbeats in erratic muffled tattoo." It is perhaps true that the fictional narrator must be more aware and more articulate than his real-life counterpart, but the reader, expecting at least an illusion of reality, too often finds an overzealous imitation of high romantic prose; that Nat, gazing from his prison window, would describe a steaming chamber pot as a "crucible" asks more suspension of disbelief than the image itself can possibly merit.

There are, to be sure, scenes in which the monologue rings true, particularly when Nat harrangues his followers in the simultaneously wheedling, chiding, flattering language they best understand. Clearly, too, Styron has a fine ear for drawing verbal distinctions between poor whites and "aristocracy" as well as between master and slave. Nat's story is arresting, touching, and disturbing, but a great deal of the enigma shrouding his extraordinary life originates not so much in his tormented and complex impulses as in the ironically genteel style he uses to recount it—a style described by one of the novel's black critics as "a sterile and leaden prose that not even massive transfusions of Old Testament rhetoric can vitalize, a strange fusion of Latinate classicism, a kind of New England Episcopalian prissiness."² While some of the objections raised by the ten black writers who "responded" to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* have little to do with the novel's literary merits, most of these critics comment directly or indirectly on the inappropriateness of Styron's language, and the point is well taken.

In a brief preface to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron describes the novel as "a meditation on history," thereby asking that it be understood in terms of a contemporary literary phenomenon that has nothing to do with the irritated racial nerves the novel initially touched. Various contemporary novelists have questioned the arbitrary lines once thought to make a neat division between fact and

² Mike Thelwell, "Back with the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, ed. John Henrik Clarke, p. 81.

fiction, between "truth" and "imagination." John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night* question both the relevance of such literary gerrymandering and the uses to which "reality" (including the reality of so-called history) can be put in the novel. Like Capote and Mailer, Styron discovered a "real" situation whose imaginative possibilities were strikingly apparent, unquestionably relevant to our times, and symbolically suggestive (a black prophet, a carpenter by training, whose immediate vengeance was directed at the town of Jerusalem).³ Nonetheless, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* Styron never presses the question of relevant form as do Barth, Capote, and Mailer. *Armies of the Night* is truly "a meditation on history"; *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is at best a skilled, if forced, "imitation" of history.

The character of Nat Turner, however unsatisfactorily developed, has interesting parallels with a kind of absurd man who has figured more prominently in European than in American fiction. In his attempt to overthrow the white order that has suppressed him, Nat becomes a cousin, at least, to a type I have found of increasing interest and relevance—the absurd man as criminal. The type was richly explored in Camus's *Caligula*, where the young emperor's growing awareness of the absurdity of existence provoked him to

³ There are interesting antecedents to Styron's work in Herman Melville's densely structured, enigmatic novella *Benito Cereno*. Melville found the germ of his story in Captain Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1817), and responded deeply to the imaginative implications of Delano's turgid account of a slave uprising at sea. Symbolically, the domination of the effete Spanish nobleman by the vengeful slaves would have appealed to Melville; so, too, would the captain's name, Benito Cereno. Babo, the mastermind of the bloody revolt, takes no lives himself, but leaves most of the violence to a savage giant who is his second-in-command—an interesting parallel to the relationship between Nat and Will; and Babo is seen, in the conclusion of the story, as a kind of black Christ. A comparison of Melville's novella with Delano's own narration offers a unique insight into the functioning of the creative imagination. Unhappily, a comparison of Styron's *Confessions* with Nat's own is a far less rewarding exercise.

force a similar awareness on his complacent patricians; to do so he challenged a hostile and destructive universe through the sheer force of his own most despotic powers. While Caligula's actions are hostile to the reverence for life that Camus found at the heart of the absurd, criminal activity is clearly one way of sustaining the disproportion between intention and reality.

No more powerful expression of a criminal response to the absurd is to be found than in the work of Jean Genet. Genet's intention is to unseat bourgeois values, to make us accept our own darkest selves, and to create a morality of drugs, thievery, imposture, homosexuality, and murder that is the precise inverse of the conventional (and, for Genet, life-denying) bourgeois morality to which his characters are denied admission. In a world where all men of feeling are outsiders, the criminal and the convict, bathed in improbably elegant imagery, stand for and suffer from the universal human plight; hence, the criminal in Genet's work is often metamorphosed into a saint, and in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, Our Lady achieves his moment of greatest glory when he ascends the scaffold. Similar conceptions of the hero as criminal are to be found in Melville's *Confidence Man*, Dostoevski's underground men, Thomas Mann's Felix Krull, and Joyce Cary's Gully Jimson. No artist in our own day, however, has carried the sense of the necessity of criminal response so far as Genet.

The concept of rebellion is fundamental to the absurd, and in the violence of his protest against the white "reality" of tidewater Virginia, Nat Turner joins with other absurd characters who sustain the disproportion between intention and reality through criminal activity; he also shares with them a characteristic lack of remorse. But Styron himself seems uncertain that we should accept his character on these terms, and in the concluding paragraphs of the novel Nat vanishes into Baldwinesque romanticism. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is an important work because of the vital questions it raises concerning the form and function of the novel; it is compelling because at moments something like a realized vision of Nat Turner emerges from beneath the rhetoric; and it is memorable in its pains-

takingly detailed portrait of plantation life. Styron is still clearly one of our most talented writers, but the ultimate significance of Nat Turner's experience seems to elude him. Nonetheless, there are sufficient hints of that significance to demonstrate a link between Nat and numerous other contemporary heroes (including Piet Hanema) who pit their wills against an indifferent world and who are exalted, not by their "victories," but by the very fierceness of their striving.

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